

**News Conference Statement
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Saskatoon
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Good morning and thank you for coming.

The Saskatoon Health Region currently has 14 occupational therapist positions sitting vacant, resulting in long waiting lists for many critical health care services, and unsafe levels of access to others.

Occupational Therapists provide wide-ranging services to a variety of patients from infants to seniors.

Patients referred to occupational therapists may have suffered a physical injury, have emotional or developmental problems, suffered a stroke, had elective surgery, or have been diagnosed with a chronic disease, among many other reasons.

The goal of occupational therapy is to **maximize** the ability of each patient to perform self-care, work and leisure activities to the best of their physical, emotional and cognitive abilities.

So the impact of these occupational therapy vacancies in the Saskatoon Health Region is widespread.

At Royal University Hospital, in the first three months of this year, more than 100 patients had to be discharged from hospital, without being seen by an occupational therapist, even though physician referrals had been made requesting the expertise of an occupational therapist.

At City Hospital, the **Rehabilitation Centre's** outpatient services have been severely restricted by the lack of occupational therapists.

There are too few occupational therapists to properly contribute to **interdisciplinary clinics** like the multiple sclerosis clinic, and the amputee program.

The **Transitional Care Unit** at Saskatoon City Hospital, where patients are prepared for transfer to long term care homes, has 60 beds, but only a single occupational therapist to try to serve them.

Physicians in the region's emergency rooms are becoming frustrated, because patients are not being seen in emergency by an occupational therapist, due to the shortage of staff.

Physicians argue that if the patients were seen in emergency, they could often be discharged from emergency, and sent home safely, instead of being admitted to hospital.

The lack of occupational therapists is not new for Saskatchewan.

Unfortunately, for many years Saskatchewan has had the dubious distinction of having the lowest number of occupational therapists for its population in all of Canada.

However, the high turnover among these specialized health care professionals, and a failure by health regions to fill longstanding vacancies, is making a bad situation even worse.

More than half of all the occupational therapists working in this province are employed by the Saskatoon Health Region.

14 vacancies among this region's occupational therapists represent a **vacancy rate** of more than 13%.

Many of these vacant positions have been unfilled for months.

Even health region **managers** admit that these positions are very hard to recruit, and that Saskatchewan can realistically target only **new graduates** to fill them.

Experienced occupational therapists are leaving for other jurisdictions, where working conditions are less stressful and wages and benefits are higher.

But our ability to recruit **new graduates** is limited by the fact that Saskatchewan is **the only Western Canadian province without** a university level Occupational Therapy Program.

This often makes it harder for our province to recruit new graduates, because we have to convince them to **move** to Saskatchewan, after they have completed their formal training elsewhere.

The vacancy problem has become so critical in Saskatoon that the health region is now proposing to **contract out** an occupational therapy position at the **Transitional Care Unit** in Saskatoon City Hospital, by hiring a private practice occupational therapist.

The health region admits that it will be paying about **\$90 per hour** for a private practice occupational therapist or **more than twice as much** as they now pay the highest rated occupational therapist on staff!

How is that a **cost-effective solution** to the problem of occupational therapy vacancies?

The Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan urges health regions to **admit** that there is a serious problem with occupational therapy vacancies in our province.

We call on the health regions to lobby hard for the creation of a **Saskatchewan-based** training program for occupational therapists.

If we can't train Saskatchewan occupational therapists here at home, we will continue to struggle at convincing them to return home to work.

In addition, we urge Saskatchewan health regions to **admit** that more competitive working conditions and wages are required to help our province retain **experienced** occupational therapists.

This challenge can be addressed under the **Market Supplement** provisions of our current collective agreement.

Thank you. I would be pleased to try to answer any questions you may have.